Critical Analysis of the Short Story: “Keeping His Promise” by Algernon Blackwood

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ENGL 126 T&R 1:00-2:30

Prof.Lugo

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Algernon Henry Blackwood



Algernon Henry Blackwood, CBE (14 March 1869 – 10 December 1951) was an English writer of fiction dealing with the supernatural, who was also a journalist and a broadcasting narrator.

S. T. Joshi has stated that “his work is more consistently meritorious than any weird writer’s except Dunsany’s” and that his short story collection Incredible Adventures “may be the premier weird collection of this or any other century”.

H. P. Lovecraft included Blackwood as one of the “Modern Masters” in the chapter of that name in Supernatural Horror in Literature. Peter Penzoldt devotes the final chapter of The Supernatural in Fiction (1952) to an analysis of Blackwood’s work, and the book is

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dedicated “with deep admiration and gratitude, to Algernon Blackwood, the greatest of them all”.

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Synopsis

Marriott is a young man in his fourth year in college with a big dilemma, if he fails again his parents won’t pay his studies anymore. He decides to study like no man has studied before; he is doing very well until something weird happened, a knock on the door at the end of night, at first he did not know who it was because the man was in such a poor condition. After looking at him for a while he noticed who it was; it was his best friend from high school and he hadn’t seen him in 4 years. He makes him and decides that he doesn’t have to tell him anything until he had dinner and slept and so in the morning he came up stairs to see his friend but he wasn’t there but he could still hear him breathing, this scared Marriott a lot. Marriott goes out and finds his friends that ask him who is in his room because they could hear someone breathing but there was no one there… And suddenly Marriott remembered something a promise to his friend; they did a pact with blood that the first one of them that died would appear to the other. Marriott writes home asking about his old friend and hears the sad news his friend died the night he was visited by him.

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In the short story “keeping his promise” by Algernon Blackwood the character is stressed, scared and exhausted. Marriott is dealing with the fact that his parents are going to take away his funds if he fails again and he is confused but happy to help his old friend. Reader response tell you how you see the story and its characters, Marriott is so involved in his life that he forgot about his friend, but at the same time he is not so involved in it because he is now failing and is depending on a test to save his education. I consider that this character is feeling for the first time what doing the best feels like, I consider he is used to having everything and for the first time he sees how a hungry man looks like and how good it feels when you do something good for someone else. Even if it is a very strange situation at the beginning you can see the character grow spiritually and in some way become a better person. Marriot is used to comfort and he is on the same road of his friend if he doesn’t change his ways, this you can deduce at the end of the story.

In this story Marriott’s friends have a very existentialistic point of view, it’s more noticeable in his friend Greene; he heard someone’s deep breathing in the room but when Marriott said what he saw that night he wouldn’t believe it. He does try to convince Marriott that he imagined it all and that the cut in his arm was a minor scrape. In the same way Marriott has his mind made up and knows that something weird happened. He refuses to believe that what happened was a product of work overload and an exhausted mind. Just

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like an existentialistic man Greene tries to find credibility to his way of viewing things and he looks for evidence (like the untouched food and rum).Greene believes that he is wrong; that shows a very Dadaistic way of thought, because he is against everything that Marriott has been saying. He really believes that what is happening is part of his imagination. The anti-whatever projection and view of the whole situation makes the characters independent, with their opinions about the strange man that “was” in his room that night; and what was really happening.

In this story surrealism very important because his long lost best friend did keep an almost impossible promise, to die and come to his friend (Marriott) first to show him that he was after all dead, it is kind of strange to Marriott that did make the promise and forgot about it. Marriott then understands what happened and that is the most surreal moment; just the understanding of the situation.

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References

* <http://hauntedcarolina.com/algernon-blackwood/>
* <http://www.americanliterature.com/Blackwood/SS/KeepingHisPromise.html>
* <http://www.hss.iitb.ac.in/courses/HS%20204/Short_Story_Guide.htm>